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D:S66
1983
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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Levine, Robert D. (Robert Daigon), 1947-
The spoken word

Cover title.
ISBN 0-7718-8371-4

1. Indians of North America - British Columbia - Languages. 2. Linguistics - British Columbia. 3. British Columbia Provincial Museum. Linguistics Division. I. British Columbia Provincial Museum. II. Title.

PM281.L48 497 C83-092212-1

Published by the British Columbia Provincial Museum
First Printing — 1983

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1983

The Spoken Word

Without the complex set of abilities we call language, what would human life be like?

At the very least, our elaborate social institutions and complex organizations would certainly not exist. Our ability to produce the objects we now use every day would vanish. Without language, planning, speculating, questioning and answering all would disappear as forms of human behaviour. One might well wonder to what degree we would still *be* human.

It has been observed that if fish were to become highly intelligent the last thing they would discover would be water. Language, as our most important tool, is constantly around us, like the fishes' water, but we too neglect it and take it for granted. The language each of us speaks is the one we usually know least about at a conscious level; we never had to study it to learn it as we do now to learn a second or third language.

We entertain the most absurd misconceptions about our own language and those of other people, such as the belief — still held by some — that German is a "scientific" language or that French is "poetic", as though a language could possess these qualities on its own. We have come late to the study of language, and languages.

In British Columbia there are approximately thirty languages in active use. Most of these are Native languages. Typically, most British Columbians are unaware of these languages in their intricacy and wealth of new perspectives on the world. Through the discipline called linguistics, we can begin to discover the riches hidden in the spoken words which fill our lives.

Understanding Languages

To discover something about other languages, the linguist attempts, as much as possible, to avoid seeing them in terms of his or her own language. The ideal is to allow the language being studied to reveal its own internal structure without forcing it into a particular mold. The linguist learns to *expect* surprises, in fact, for experience shows how much diversity is possible even amongst related languages.

The linguist's data are utterances in the languages being studied. These, along with their English translations, are recorded in notebooks in a phonetic writing system. The ordinary English alphabet will not do because, in British Columbia, the Native languages possess many sounds which are unknown in English, or in any European language for that matter. Learning both to produce these speech sounds and to recognize them is part of the linguist's training.

The next step for the linguist is to compare the sentences in the Native language with the sentences in his or her own language — say, English. Sometimes a certain "piece" of a word in the Native language will have no obvious corresponding meaning in English. Such findings strongly suggest that there is more involved in the Native word than the translation indicates, but the difference is often quite subtle. A speaker of Haida will use two slightly different sentences to say "he was cold (someone told me)" or "he was cold (I figured out later)" on the one hand, and "he was cold (and I saw it at the time)" on the other. The difference — between information the speaker claims to have firsthand and information which is secondhand — is basic in Haida, while in English we only add this information when we feel it is important. Such differences in basic distinctions are extremely common amongst languages.

Eventually, after several years, the linguist is ready to write a description of how "pieces", with perhaps very different meanings from what the English speaker is used to, are combined to form words, and how words are combined to produce the English translations. Throughout this process the linguist's goal is to learn what the parts of the Native words mean as they function in the Native language. The process is never really complete because languages are probably too complex to be described completely regardless of how long linguists study them or how detailed their investigations are.

Here is an example of one sort of material the linguist studies.

Even though you probably are unfamiliar with the symbols used to write these words, you can immediately see that the words in the first two columns are similar, while those in the third column are different from the first two. This pattern suggests that Nootka and Kwakwala are historically related — that they descend from a common ancestor — and that Saanich is *not* related to them. By extending this sort of comparison to large collections of vocabulary, and examining all the languages in British Columbia from this point of view, linguists have acquired an understanding of historical relations amongst the Province's languages which is represented on the accompanying map. (page 4)

	NOOTKA	KWAKWALA	SAANICH
hair	**hap-sy̓op**	**hap-əm**	**siʔétən**
windy	**yo-ʔi**	**yo-la**	**χéχ̓**
drink	**naq-šiχ**	**naq-a**	**qʷáʔqʷəʔɬ**
snow	**k̓ʷi·s**	**k̓ʷis**	**néqəʔ**
sea (action)	**c̓a-ʔoɬa** (rough sea)	**c̓a-Gud** (tides running against each other)	**χ̓ɬéɬsə** (saltwater)
winter	**c̓o-ʔičh**	**c̓u-ʔənχ**	**čəṅc̓áɬəθ**

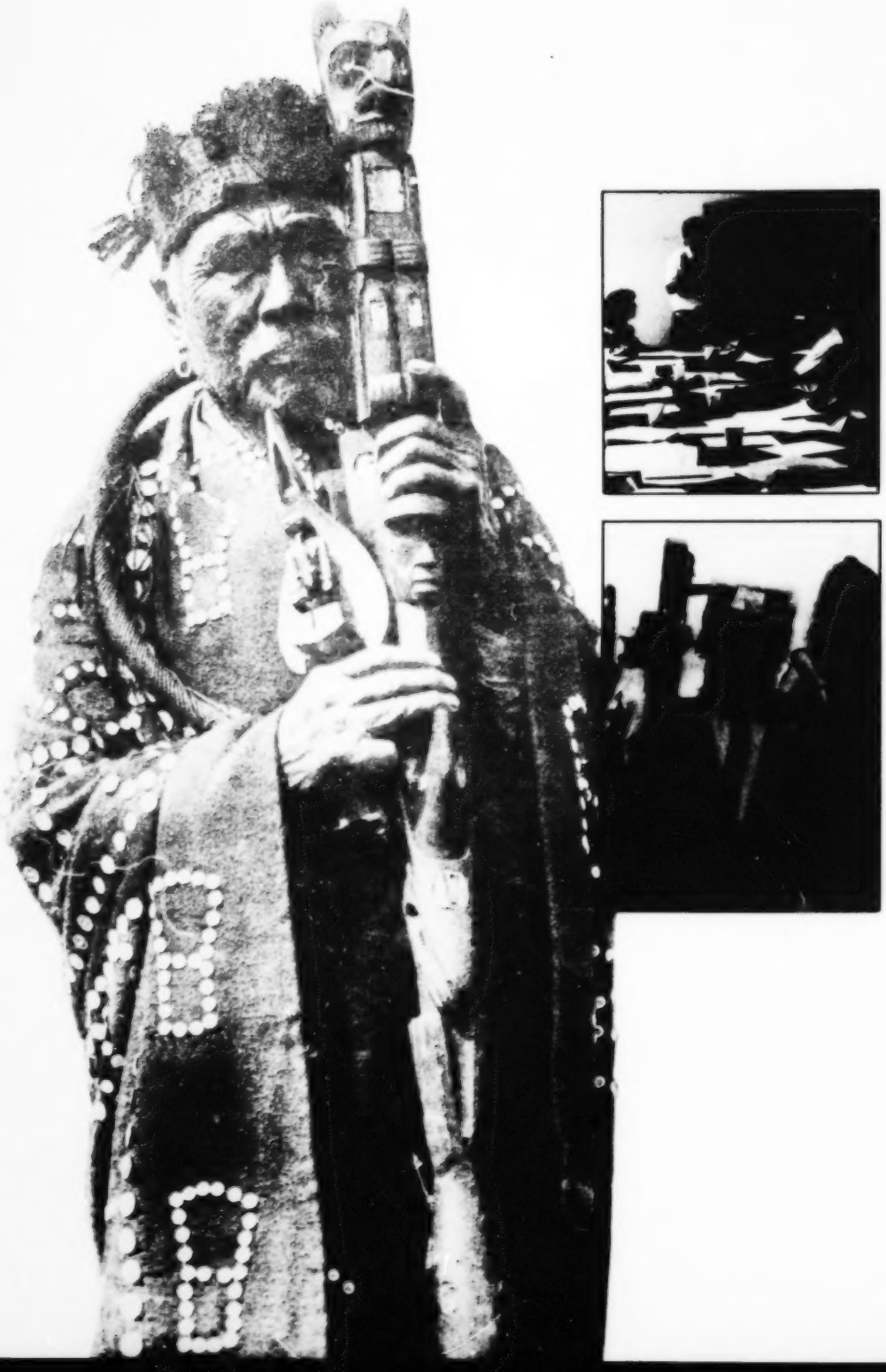
Languages of B.C.

The family memberships given for each language are the largest non-controversial groupings currently possible. Two larger groupings are under investigation: the possible linkage of Kutenai to Salish and of Tlingit to Athapaskan. Tsetsaut and Nicola (A) and Pentlatch (S) are extinct.

Recording Languages

The use of portable tape recorders has greatly aided the linguist's work. Previously, myths, songs and so on were written down verbatim as uttered by the speaker — a difficult task even for an accomplished linguist. The modern investigator now records the story as the speaker tells it and then reviews it with the speaker, bit by bit, repeatedly playing back portions which are difficult or unclear. Tapes can also be used to record the data collected in the linguist's notebook and provide documentation for the information recorded there.

To provide the widest possible coverage of the Province's languages, the Linguistics Division of the British Columbia Provincial Museum has contracted with a number of specialists for transcriptions and tape-recordings of utterances in various Native languages. These tapes, together with others which have been donated to the Museum, or recorded by the Division form a valuable archives of British Columbia's linguistic heritage. Because of the need to protect the interests of the people recorded, various restrictions on access to the taped material — worked out among the Museum, the linguist, and the speakers — have been imposed. Such restrictions are particularly important in the case of societies like the Native communities of the Pacific Northwest in which words — myths, songs and so on — are considered to be *property*, with individual ownership. The Museum has a strong commitment to respect the feelings and desires of those who contribute significant elements of their culture.



Exchanging Ideas On Languages

Since late in the nineteenth century, the Pacific Northwest has proven one of the most exciting and challenging regions of the world for those who pursue an understanding of language. On Vancouver Island, starting in the 1890s, the great Franz Boas did some of the most fruitful linguistic research ever undertaken, and many of his associates and students, students' students, and *their* students, have returned to British Columbia to study the Province's Native languages.

Today there are many linguists working in the Pacific Northwest. None works in a vacuum; there are often resemblances amongst languages which all linguists pursuing research within a single language family, or even different families which have been in contact for a long time, will encounter. The exchange of ideas is critical to the advancement of knowledge. There are several contexts in which exchange is possible for linguists in the Northwest.

The International Conference on Salishan Languages, which has met annually for more than a decade, is the forum for work-in-progress among Northwestern linguists. The ideas and hypotheses presented receive close scrutiny and comments from the audience. This process is a necessary and valuable part of the growth of knowledge in any field, and the Salish Conference, in which members of the Linguistics Division have participated both as audience and as speakers, has played a significant role in developing our current understanding of British Columbia's languages.

The Museum has also sponsored conferences which have ranged from formal meetings, at which papers by eminent speakers are presented, to open sessions at which those with serious research interests in language can discuss their findings.

Such conferences yield important information. For example, at the Victoria Conference on Northwestern Languages, held at the British Columbia Provincial Museum in 1976, Professor John Dunn of Oregon State University revealed that what had previously been thought of as a dialect of Coast Tsimshian was, in his opinion, a separate *language*, thus bringing the number of known Tsimshian languages to three.

Preserving Languages

The languages of the Pacific Northwest are in serious danger. The threat to their survival began late in the ninteenth century when, in Canada and the United States, government and church policy prohibited Native children in residential schools from using their own languages even while playing. The result of this suppression, which lasted for decades, is evident today when one looks at contemporary Native communities. Children now virtually never learn their ancestral language at home (except in the more remote parts of the Province, where there were no boarding schools). When children no longer learn their language, that language is on the road to extinction.

One of the most important contributions linguistics can make to the survival of Native languages is to provide technical advice to Native projects devoted to reviving the use of the ancestral languages. The linguist, encountering these languages as an outsider, is able to identify aspects which are relatively less complex, and hence more easily learned, and to write language lessons which lead to progressively more difficult areas of the languages' grammar.

Increasingly, as Native people themselves become trained as linguists, they are able to make significant improvements in such lessons, benefiting from their firsthand knowledge of the language to extract often highly subtle differences in shades of meaning. Throughout North America such collaboration between Native peoples and linguists represents a hopeful start in what is still an uncertain enterprise. The Linguistics Division participates in this work primarily by attempting to make the public aware of the value and interest of these languages and to focus attention on the social and political forces which have brought them to their current grave crisis.

The Linguist At Work

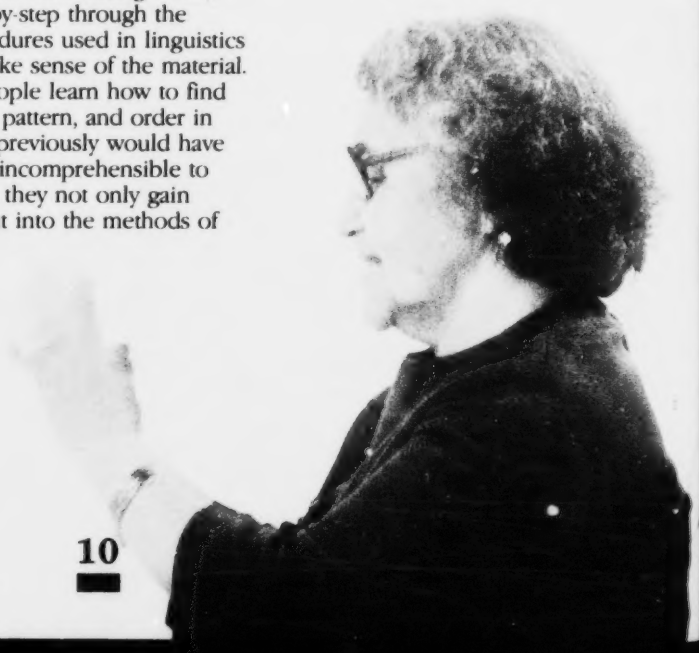
An ordinary working day for linguists at the British Columbia Provincial Museum involves considerable variety. Several hours will often be devoted to collecting data from speakers of Native languages who have often worked with Division staff members for many years. The quantity of material collected during even one of these sessions may require many more hours, or even days, to analyze. On days when such working sessions are not taking place, the linguist may be writing up the results of the research, with a view to publishing them in scholarly journals or incorporating them into oral presentations. Apart from linguistic analysis, Division staff are kept busy assisting members of the public who contact the Museum by telephone, or show up in person, to satisfy their curiosity about various questions involving Native languages. In some cases visitors to the Division are part of special programs in Museum studies or Native studies who want to learn the facilities and resources available in the Division.

Native people interested in starting language programs in their own community are among those who make use of the Division's extensive collection of teaching materials from existing programs throughout North America. Division staff also assist other government offices requiring specific information about the meaning of Native words and similar questions. Apart from contact with the public, Museum linguists communicate information through exhibits, which demand, as do all Museum displays, considerable detailed planning and collaboration amongst several Divisions. And always there are ordinary professional responsibilities: correspondence with colleagues at other institutions to be maintained, books to be ordered for the Division's reference library, and many other everyday elements of Museum routine.

Getting The Word Out

The heart of any scientific inquiry is the search for information. Objects are of interest to the scientist not primarily for aesthetic or economic reasons, but because of what they contribute to the understanding of some phenomenon, the illumination of some mystery. The masks studied by the ethnologist or the crystals studied by the geologist may be beautiful, but they are *data,* leading to insights into, say, ceremonial organization and the prehistory of landforms. Once this information is gathered, it requires an outlet so that others, who do not have access to the data, may also benefit from its interpretation. The linguist has the same responsibility to "get the word out." But while the data of most disciplines are something one can point to, something three-dimensional, languages are like mathematical systems in that they do not occupy space but rather are sets of rules by which people talk to and understand each other. The relationship between a series of sentences one can hear and the language itself is roughly like that between a performance of a piece of music and the score for that piece. This greater degree of abstraction makes the job of getting the word out much more difficult when the linguist attempts to present the results of an investigation to the general public.

One of the most satisfactory ways of sharing information is through public lectures. Members of the Linguistics Division have, from time to time, given general talks about their work to local organizations, distributing samples of data to the audience and taking them, step-by-step through the procedures used in linguistics to make sense of the material. As people learn how to find logic, pattern, and order in what previously would have been incomprehensible to them, they not only gain insight into the methods of linguistics, but begin to appreciate the beauty and structural integrity of the languages themselves. A demonstration of this sort is highly effective in eliminating misconceptions which many people still have, such as the idea that non-European languages are less effective as communication tools than European languages.



Linguistics is an academic discipline widely represented in universities in the Northwest, where, quite naturally, many faculty members are carrying out research on languages native to this area. To present a more comprehensive picture of the linguistic structures encountered, instructors frequently ask colleagues to speak about their specialties to linguistic classes, or give seminars or colloquia. Members of the Linguistics Division have on numerous occasions assisted their academic compatriots in this manner.

Getting the word out to colleagues in the field is another important responsibility to the linguist, particularly because there are so few people studying the languages of the New World. It is uncommon, in the Pacific Northwest for more than two people to be actively investigating any given language. Hence there is a special onus on those carrying out those studies to supply others in the field with the fruits of their research. The normal outlets for such reports are scholarly journals and full-length monographs.

The Linguistics Division has contracted for a number of detailed grammars, each devoted to one of the languages of British Columbia. Each grammar will give a comprehensive structural description of the language discussed. These grammars, each written by the authority on the language, will provide a wealth of vital information for scholars in linguistics, ethnology, and other disciplines.

Within the context of the British Columbia Provincial Museum itself, the chief avenue of communication between the specialist and the public is the exhibit gallery. An exhibit of the Linguistics Division is being prepared which will cover the geographical spread and historical diversification of the Province's Native languages, the infinite variety of their structures, their history since European settlement, and many other aspects of the spoken word in Native British Columbia.

Further Information

Further Reading

Very little material is currently available for the general public on native languages of the New World. Most publications devoted to these languages are intended for specialists and are quite technical. One source which is accessible to non-linguists is Edward Sapir's *Language*, a short discussion of language in general which is recognized as one of the enduring classics in the field, and which contains many references to, and examples from, native languages of the Pacific northwest. Slightly more difficult, and written in a somewhat dated style, is Franz Boas' 'Introduction' to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* published in 1911 by the Bureau of American Ethnology. Boas, who was unquestionably one of the greatest linguists of all time, presented in this Introduction a number of extremely important conclusions about language based on his own work and that of his colleagues, and his ideas still possess vitality and urgency seventy years later; many of Boas' examples are taken from languages of British Columbia. *Sound Heritage* 4, no. 3/4 contains articles about native British Columbia languages which are of general interest. At the time of this writing, the British Columbia Provincial Museum

is planning to publish a collection of articles on various linguistic phenomena and language families of the Province aimed at a general audience. The bibliographical entries for the sources cited above are:

Franz Boas/J.W. Powell. 1966 *Introduction to Handbook of American Indian Languages.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Thomas Hunt, James King, Alice and Larry Paul, John Thomas and participants in the June 1982 Working Conference on Central Coast Salishan Languages for permitting us to use the photographs in which they appear in this publication.

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POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL